

Thanks largely to the establishment of national parks, Dr David Ashton is outlived by plant communities which he and his students investigated. He is also survived by his published papers, which provide foundations for wise conservation and management decisions; by the ideas and practices of his postgraduate students in

CSIRO, national parks and forestry, universities and schools; and by the 'David Ashton Biodiversity Award' to encourage the conservation of Victoria's biodiversity.

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The Victorian Twitchathon: racing for ornithological conservation

On a warm weekend in November 2005 the Seven Year Twitchers raced and won Birds Australia's Victorian Twitchathon. The following article is a diary of this remarkable two-day event.

So what is the Twitchathon? The Twitchathon is a 24-hour race that involves dozens of birdwatchers madly rushing around the Australian bush attempting to see or hear (read twitch) as many bird species as possible. The aim of the Twitchathon is to raise money, through team sponsorship, for ornithological research and conservation.

The name of the race is based on the term 'twitcher', hard-core birdwatchers who chase rare birds. The rules state that each team must have at least two participants, with four being the norm. Our team had four members: Tim Dolby, Greg Oakley, John Harris and Fiona Parkin.

An important aspect of winning the Twitchathon is that teams must cover enormous distances in a 24-hour period. If you include the pre-race reconnaissance, by the end of the race we had travelled well over 1400 kilometres. The main reason for this is that in order to see a wide variety of bird species you must also cover as many different habitat types as possible. During the race we visited Mallee, Box-Ironbark,

grassy woodlands, wet and dry sclerophyll forests, freshwater wetland, coastal heath, saltmarsh, mudflat and the open ocean. The diversity of birds we saw reflected these diverse habitats.

Day One

Over the years the Seven Year Twitchers have used a number of different routes around Victoria. This year we chose to start our race at Goschen Bushland Reserve, a small isolated mallee reserve west of Lake Boga in northern Victoria. Goschen usually contains spring-flowering Long-leaf Emu-bush *Eremophila longifolia*, a small rough-barked tree that acts as a vital food source for some of our rare and nomadic honeyeaters. One bird in particular, the elusive, almost mythical, Black Honeyeater loves the stuff. A member of



Spotted Pardalote *Pardalotus punctatus*.
Photograph by Jonathon Thornton



Black-chinned Honeyeater. *Melithreptus gularis*. Photograph by Jonathon Thornton

our team had not seen (or heard) Black Honeyeater before, so during our pre-race reconnaissance I demonstrated my somewhat dubious impersonation skills of a Black Honeyeater call. To everyone's surprise someone immediately exclaimed, "There's one, right behind you!" Of course this was the only Black Honeyeater we saw at Goschen, a good two hours before the race had begun.

Still on our pre-race reconnaissance, 30 minutes before the start of the race, we came across a pair of Variegated Fairy-wren. This can be a notoriously tricky bird to get on to, especially when you are in a hurry. We were not going to make the same mistake twice, so we surrounded the wrens in a bush, stood around for half an hour, and then ticked it as our first bird for the Twitchathon at 4:00 pm sharp. The race was on!

After a mad dash around Goschen we also ticked White-



Tim Dolby seaching for albatross. Photograph by Tanya Bramley

browed Woodswallow, Hooded Robin, Rufous Songlark, White-winged Triller, Yellow-throated Miner, White-browed Babbler, Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater, Chestnut-rumped Thornbill, Brown Treecreeper, Striated Pardalote, Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike and Rufous Whistler. However we had dipped (a birding term meaning 'missed seeing') on a few birds we had hoped to see at Goschen, including Black Honeyeater, Budgerigar and Cockatiel. It was still a good start to the race. The call went out, 'We've been here twenty minutes. Let's go!'

Next stop was Lake Boga. On the way out of Goschen we were fortunate to pick up Blue Bonnet and Pied Butcherbird, and we stopped at a nearby dam, ticking Greenshank, Whiskered Tern, Pink-eared Duck, Australian Shoveler, Australian Reed-Warbler and Little Grasshird.

Lake Boga is known as the 'Home of the Catalina' because it was a Flying Boat Repair Depot during the Second World War. For the moment we were not interested in seeing this magnificent flying machine. We were planning to catch up with a smaller flying machine, Gull-billed Tern, which can sometimes be seen hawking around the lakes. Lake Boga is one of the only sites in Victoria where you can reliably expect to see this bird, and this year several tern were seen on the lake's fringe. We also added Great Crested Grebe, Black-froned Dotterel, White-breasted Woodswallow and Blue-faced Honeyeater.

Lake Boga is part of a larger freshwater lake system, which takes in the Kerang Lakes. The nearby Lake Tutchewop, on the other hand, is saltwater and as a consequence is a major inland site for migratory waders. At this stage of the race, however, we weren't particularly interested in seeing the waders. (We'd catch up with them later at the Western Treatment Plant near Werribee.) What we were after was the glorious White-winged Fairy-wren, a bird that inhabits the saltbush around the edge of the lake. In full plumage this must surely be one of Australia's most attractive birds. We quickly heard, then saw, some of these beautiful wrens and we also got on to Australian Pipit, Brown Songlark and Fairy Martin. Sadly we dipped on both Zebra Finch and Great Egret, two birds we had seen at Lake Tutchewop before the race.

Another bird we had seen earlier in the day was a pair of Brolga along the roadside between Kerang and Bendigo. Of course they had also moved on. On the road, however, we did catch up with some good raptors, Black Kite, Nankeen Kestrel, Brown Falcon, Whistling Kite and Swamp Harrier. I had a site for White-hacked Swallow at a quarry just north of Terrick Terrick National Park; however, we somehow managed to take a wrong turn. I'm sure the map is wrong! Fortunately this mistake produced a couple of bonus birds, Masked Woodswallow and Long-billed Corella.

Declared a national park in 1998, Terrick Terrick contains one of the most significant remaining areas of native grasslands in Victoria. It is also home to a number of rare and threatened bird species such as Plains-wanderer and Grey-crowned Babbler. One of the best areas for birding is around the picnic ground at the base of Mt Terrick, which is nestled in woodlands dominated by White Cypress-pine. Bird-wise, Terrick Terrick can run hot or cold. Luckily today it was a hot! On the drive into the picnic area we immediately picked up Diamond Firetail, Mistletoebird, Jacky Winter, Peaceful Dove and White-winged Chough. Then, at the base of the rock, we also ticked Gilbert's Whistler, Red-capped Robin, Mallee Ringneck (a bird that had been noticeably absent just a few weeks earlier) and then our 'best bird' for the Twitchathon, a nesting pair of Painted Honeyeater. After forcing ourselves to move on (and not grab a camera) we added Southern Whiteface, Yellow-rumped Thornbill, Restless Flycatcher, Common Bronzewing and Little Eagle. Great birding!

At this stage we calculated our total to be around 110 bird species. It was getting late and we had to hurry to make sure that we could add some Box-Ironbark and Whipstick birds to our list. At Kamarooka, part of the newly formed Greater Bendigo National Park, we quickly got on to Black-chinned, Fuscous and Yellow-tufted Honeyeater and then heard a distant Crested Bellbird. At the nearby Whipstick, a fantastic area of broombush mallee, we ticked our target species Shy Hylacola, but also recorded both White-eared and Tawny-crowned Honeyeater.

The sun was setting and we had two options: either go straight to our next desti-

nation, the Otway Ranges (over four hours drive away), giving us time to try for some night birds and hopefully to get some sleep, or hang around for an hour or so and try to pick up a Spotted Nightjar. Of course we hung around, thankfully spotlighting the nightjar just after dusk. We also ticked a night-calling Pallid Cuckoo.

We then drove to the Otways and to a bush campsite near Lorne, arriving around 2:00 am. We immediately heard Boobook Owl, Owlet Nightjar and, surprisingly, a Fantailed Cuckoo. This was the second cuckoo we had ticked during the night; since when had cuckoos become nocturnal?

Day Two

After approximately three hours' sleep (deep sleep in my case and yes, I dreamt about birds), dawn broke in the coastal sclerophyll forests of the Otway Ranges. The area we birded was in a deep valley bordered by towering Blue Gum and Mountain Ash. This is a great spot to bird-watch. At times the sound of the dawn chorus is almost deafening, precisely why it is such a good place to race a Twitchathon. Listening to that dawn chorus, not only can you tick a dozen new species by just standing in one place, you can tick half a dozen before you've even got out of your sleeping bag! We added Crescent Honeyeater, Satin Bowerbird, Rose Robin, Gang-gang Cockatoo, Golden Whistler, White-throated Treecreeper, Australian King-Parrot, Pied Currawong, Eastern Spinebill, White-browed Scrubwren, Brown Thornbill and Eastern Yellow Robin.

After packing up our tents, we drove down to the coast, and then east along the Great Ocean Road, first to Aireys Inlet for Latham's Snipe and Rufous Bristlebird, and then the Anglesea heath for Southern Emu-wren. At Point Addis, Blue-winged Parrot and Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo flew above our heads as we scoped Shy Albatross and Short-tailed Shearwater. We were also particularly interested in catching up with Painted Button-quail at Point Addis Ironbark Reserve. Their platelets, small circular clearings the size of cow paddies created when they feed, were everywhere. A few weeks earlier a member of our team had been kicking Painted

Button-quail out of the way; of course, today there were none. We did however tick Satin Flycatcher and Red-browed Finch, but dipped on Buff-rumped Thornbill, a bird that can usually be found around the Ironbark Reserve car park.

Breamlea is a place that always seems to throw up major surprises. Last year we saw a Greater Sand Plover. This year we ticked both Common Sandpiper and Whimbrel, two bonus birds that we had not previously considered for our final tally. There were however, no Hooded Plover, our target species for Breamlea.

After Breamlea we drove around the Bellarine Peninsula, stopping at Barwon Heads for Eastern Curlew, more Whimbrel, Pied Oystercatcher, Royal Spoonbill, Black-tailed Godwit, Bar-tailed Godwit, Caspian Tern – and then to Lake Lorne (at Drysdale) for Freckled Duck and Blue-billed Duck. On the way through Geelong we picked with Nankeen Night Heron and Crested Shrike-tit on the Barwon River.

Our next stop was a Mecca for Victorian birders, the Western Treatment Plant – known to birders as 'Werribee'. Werribee is a truly magnificent site for birds, with nearly 300 species being recorded. It is home to thousands of wildfowl, and in summer thousands of waders arrive from their breeding grounds in the northern hemisphere. A week earlier I had done some reconnaissance of Werribee and the place was teeming with good birds. Today, however, it was quiet! (Or maybe we were just in a rush?) We didn't see any Curlew Sandpiper (possibly our biggest dip), a bird I had seen easily the previous week, and also there were no egrets (our other big dip). We did see Red-kneed Dotterel, Black-tailed Native-hen, Australasian Gannet, Striated Calamanthus, Yellow-billed Spoonbill, Musk Duck, and large numbers of Cape Barren Geese (the most I have ever seen at Werribee). We also came across an albino Australian Shelduck, which, take away the colour, looks surprisingly like a white domestic duck.

At this stage we did a quick analysis of our race total. Somehow, somewhere, we had miscalculated! We had initially thought we were around 190, and well on the way to 200 plus. After a quick recount



Tawny-crowned Honeyeater *Glyciphila melanops*. Photograph by Jonathon Thornton.

we found our total was 10 birds down, just over 180! I was stumped. We couldn't retrace our steps and pick up the birds we had missed, and we were going to have to rush just to get to 190. We had better hurry!

The You Yangs always surprise me. One of the best birding spots is a dry erosive creek bed appropriately called Hovels Creek. To get there you have to walk a kilometre down a track bordered by plantation eucalypts, climb over a tricky barbed-wire fence, hopefully avoiding tetanus and injury to the nether regions. Fortunately, what is most surprising is that you tend to pick up the woodland birds that you've missed previously, including Sacred Kingfisher, Rainbow Bee-eater, Purple-crowned Lorikeet, Musk Lorikeet and Olive-backed Oriole. We also saw Black-chinned Honeyeater, a bird we'd ticked earlier, but nonetheless a good sighting for the You Yangs.

It was 3:15 pm, the race was scheduled to finish at 4:00 pm, and we had mistimed our run home. What do we do for the next three quarters of an hour? We had recorded all the birds that we were likely to see in the You Yangs, and we were committed to being at the post-twitchathon BBQ at the Big Rock Picnic Area. Basically we had to hang around and wait. There was, however,

one target bird we had not seen at the You Yangs, a Wedge-tailed Eagle. If you are lucky you can see Wedgies circling one of the hilltops, so we quickly drove to the highest point that we could reach and with 10 minutes to spare we ticked a single Wedge-tailed Eagle disappearing over a distant hillside ridge.

For me, one of the great puzzles of participating in a Twitchathon is what do you do in the last 10 minutes of racing? You usually have no time to go anywhere, you are unlikely to add any new birds to your list, and you are also totally zonked. So what do you do? Of course we sat down and pished! 'Pishing' is a birding term which means making strange squeaking noises with your mouth. It is somehow meant to imitate the sound of an injured animal, or something like that. Surprisingly, birds in their curiosity are attracted to this sound. Indeed, it is a technique that can be surprisingly effective, working particularly well in enclosed areas such as mangroves. By pishing we may still stand a chance of adding Speckled Warbler or perhaps Scarlet or Flame Robin. (One of the ironies with our Twitchathon route was that we were far more likely to see Hooded, Red-capped and Rose Robin than we were to see the more common Scarlet or Flame Robin.) Needless to say, our first bird for the Twitchathon was Variegated Fairy-wren and our last bird was Wedge-tailed Eagle. Quite rightly so!

By the end of the race we had travelled over 1400 kilometres, with our final total at 192 species in 24 hours. We were all very tired but ready to take on the challenge of another Twitchathon in 2006.

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